



PROJECT MUSE®

## Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations: A Reexamination of the Niphal and Hitpael of נִפְּלַל in the Patriarchal Narratives

Benjamin J. Noonan

Hebrew Studies, Volume 51, 2010, pp. 73-93 (Article)

Published by National Association of Professors of Hebrew

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hbr.2010.a400578>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/400578>

# ABRAHAM, BLESSING, AND THE NATIONS: A REEXAMINATION OF THE NIPHAL AND HITPAEL OF בָּרַךְ IN THE PATRIARCHAL NARRATIVES\*

Benjamin J. Noonan  
*Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion*

A long-recognized *crux interpretum* in Genesis is the diathesis of the Niphal (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14) and Hitpael (Gen 22:18; 26:4) stems of בָּרַךְ in the different renditions of the patriarchal promise of blessing. Many scholars assume that both stems should be translated the same way, arguing for either a medio-passive (“be blessed” or “become blessed”) or a reflexive (“bless themselves”) translation. After investigating the functions of the Niphal, Piel, and Hitpael verbal stems in biblical Hebrew, this paper reexamines the Niphal and Hitpael of בָּרַךְ in the Hebrew Bible and argues that these two stems of this lexeme have different meanings contextually. Despite their different nuances, however, both stems indicate that the nations are blessed by means of Abraham, not that they utter blessings using Abraham’s name because they recognize his status as one greatly blessed by God.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A long-recognized *crux interpretum* in Genesis is the diathesis of the Niphal (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14) and Hitpael (Gen 22:18; 26:4) stems of בָּרַךְ in the different renditions of the patriarchal promise of blessing. Many scholars assume that both stems should be translated the same way, arguing for either a medio-passive or a reflexive translation. These two translations reflect two distinct paradigms of understanding the relationship between Abraham and the nations, respectively: blessing mediation (the nations are blessed through Abraham) and blessing utterance (the nations will utter blessings using the name of Abraham, recognizing his status as one greatly blessed by God). The difference between these interpretative frameworks is significant, as aptly summarized by Michael Brown: “In point of fact, it is one thing to receive blessing through Abraham’s seed (passive or middle sense); it is another thing to desire to be like Abraham’s seed (based on the reflexive sense).”<sup>1</sup>

---

\* I would like to thank those who have assisted me at various stages of this essay, including John Walton, Hassell Bullock, Hélène Dallaire, Sam Meier, and Richard Benton as well as my colleagues at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion.

<sup>1</sup> M. L. Brown, “בָּרַךְ,” *NIDOTTE* 1:760.

In this paper, I will reexamine the patriarchal promises of blessing, building upon several recent studies that have dealt with this important topic<sup>2</sup> and arguing that the Niphal and Hitpael stems of בָּרַךְ have different meanings contextually. First, I will examine the meaning of the root בָּרַךְ in light of the functions of the pertinent verbal stems in biblical Hebrew. Next, I will evaluate the meaning of the Niphal and Hitpael stems of בָּרַךְ in view of their usage outside the book of Genesis and available evidence from other Semitic languages. Lastly, I will turn to the passages in which the Niphal and Hitpael stems of בָּרַךְ are used within Genesis. I will demonstrate that, despite their different nuances, both stems fall within the basic paradigm of blessing mediation rather than blessing utterance.

## 2. THE NIPHAL AND HITPAEL OF בָּרַךְ IN BIBLICAL HEBREW

### 2.1 The Function of the Niphal, Piel, and Hitpael in Biblical Hebrew

A fundamental feature of the biblical Hebrew verbal system, as in many of the Semitic languages, is its distinction between active (fientive) and stative verbs.<sup>3</sup> Based on a verb's classification as active or stative, it will typically behave in a certain manner in each of the verbal stems. Thus, the different verbal stems enable the expansion of the lexicon, modifying the basic meaning of the verbal root, but how that meaning changes depends on whether the verb is active or stative. With this in mind, it is now necessary to survey the verbal stems pertinent to this investigation, namely the Niphal, Piel, and Hitpael.

The Niphal stem of active verbs typically indicates the passive or middle voice, expressing a state related to the basic meaning of the verb in the Qal stem. If the verb is stative, the Niphal frequently denotes ingressive (i.e.,

<sup>2</sup> K. N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in its Narrative Context* (BZAW 332; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003); A. Flury-Schölch, *Abrahams Segen und die Völker: Synchron und diachron Untersuchungen zu Gen 12, 1–3 unter besonder Berücksichtigung der intertextuellen Beziehungen zu Gen 18; 22; 26; 28; Sir 44; Jer 4 und Ps 72* (FB 115; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2007); R. C. Benton, "The Niphal and Hitpael of בָּרַךְ in the Patriarchal Narratives," *Kleine Untersuchungen zur Sprache des Alten Testaments und seiner Umwelt* 8 (2008): 1–17.

<sup>3</sup> P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (trans. and rev. T. Muraoka; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Subsidia biblica 27; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2006), §§41a–b; B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), §22.2.1; S. A. Kaufman, "Semitics: Directions and Re-Directions," in *The Study of the Ancient Near East in the Twenty-First Century: The William Foxwell Albright Centennial Conference* (ed. J. S. Cooper and G. M. Schwartz; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996), p. 282. Fientive verbs denote an action in which the verb is grammatically active and may be either transitive or intransitive. Stative verbs describe a circumstance or state and are, by nature, intransitive in their base stem.

middle) action, describing a process by which the state expressed by the Qal stem comes about.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Niphal is best characterized as a medio-passive—not reflexive—verbal stem in biblical Hebrew, which is consistent with the N-stem’s usage in other Semitic languages, such as Akkadian and Ugaritic.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to popular belief, there are few genuine examples of reflexive Niphals in the Hebrew Bible. The misconception of the Niphal as reflexive arises primarily from reliance on translation possibilities in modern target languages rather than internal linguistic analysis.<sup>6</sup> According to an important study on the Niphal stem by Stephen Boyd, many examples commonly thought to be semantically reflexive are actually agentless middles with only one semantic role (actor), not two (agent and patient) as required for a genuinely reflexive verb.<sup>7</sup> The few possible examples of reflexive Niphals are largely limited to verbs relating to exchange and contact, such as גָּאַל or מָכַר. Significantly, these verbs belong to the active rather than stative category. Similarly, while the Niphal stem can mark actions that can be translated as reciprocal, this is not a common usage either. The Niphal only has this function in the case of a few verbs, such as אָבַק or לָחַם, in which interaction between two parties is described. Once again, it is notable that these verbs belong to the active rather than stative category.

As indicated by its morphology, the Hitpaël stem typically modifies the meaning of the Piel.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is important to investigate the function of the

<sup>4</sup> S. A. Kaufman, review of P. A. Siebesma, *The Function of the Niph'al in Biblical Hebrew in Relationship to Other Passive-Reflexive Verbal Stems and to the Pu'al and Hoph'al in Particular*, CBQ 56 (1994): 572–573. In this way, the Niphal of stative verbs functions similarly to the N-stem of stative verbs in Akkadian (W. von Soden, *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik* [3<sup>rd</sup> enlarged ed.; AnOr 33; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1995], §90g; cf. B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction*, §23.3c).

<sup>5</sup> W. von Soden, *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik*, §90e; P. Bordreuil and D. Pardee, *A Manual of Ugaritic* (Linguistic Studies in Ancient West Semitic 3; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009), pp. 44, 47. For a critique of the view that the N-stem is reflexive in Ugaritic, see D. Pardee, review of J. Tropper, *Ugaritische Grammatik*, AfO 50 (2003–2004): 266–267 (online: <http://www.univie.ac.at/orientalistik/>).

<sup>6</sup> S. Kaufman, review of Siebesma, pp. 572–573; S. W. Boyd, “A Synchronic Analysis of the Medio-Passive-Reflexive in Biblical Hebrew” (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1993), p. 281. Although it is possible that assimilation of the Hitpaël’s infixed-*t* to the first root consonant is a more common phenomenon in biblical Hebrew than often thought, it is unlikely—not to mention difficult to prove—that verbal forms appearing to exhibit this type of assimilation should be reanalyzed as Niphals as Baden has contended (J. S. Baden, “Hitpaël and Niphal in Biblical Hebrew: Semantic and Morphological Overlap,” VT 60 [2010]: 33–44). Thus, his arguments do not demonstrate that the Niphal was a productive reflexive stem in biblical Hebrew.

<sup>7</sup> S. W. Boyd, “A Synchronic Analysis,” pp. 122–238; cf. K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, pp. 34–66. As defined by Boyd, agentless middles include verbs in which the subject is in control of the action of the verb (“self-move middles”) or verbs with an unspecified initiator, verbs denoting spontaneous actions, and actions due to distant causation (“process middles”).

<sup>8</sup> E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (trans. A. E. Cowley; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Oxford, 1910), §54a; P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §53a; B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction*, §26.1.1a.

Piel stem in biblical Hebrew before turning to the Hitpael. For active verbs, the Piel typically denotes plurality (i.e., repeated action or multiple objects), a function often misleadingly called “intensive” in various grammars. This function is found in many of the Semitic languages, including Akkadian, classical and modern Arabic, and biblical Aramaic.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the Piel of stative verbs is primarily factitive, expressing the bringing about of a state of the verb or a declaration or estimation that the state exists.<sup>10</sup> The object acted upon by the main verb, or undersubject, is made to be in or considered or declared to be in a state related to the verbal root. As such, the verb is active and the undersubject is the passive recipient.<sup>11</sup> This distinction between the pluralitive and factitive functions is significant, for it demonstrates that the active and stative verb dichotomy also exists in the Piel stem.<sup>12</sup>

For both active and stative verbs, the primary function of the Hitpael stem is to indicate reflexivity, although it can also indicate reciprocity.<sup>13</sup> Because the Hitpael modifies the meaning of the Piel, the Hitpael of active verbs is the direct or indirect reflexive of the Piel stem. Hitpael forms of stative verbs are also reflexive, but because the Piel of stative verbs is facti-

<sup>9</sup> J. H. Greenberg, “The Semitic ‘Intensive’ as Verbal Plurality: A Study of Grammaticalization,” in *Semitic Studies in Honor of Wolf Leslau on the Occasion of His Eighty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. A. S. Kaye; 2 vols.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991), 1:577–587; S. Kaufman, “Semitics,” pp. 280–282; cf. P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §52d; B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction*, §§24.3.3; 24.5. The “resultative” category of grammars such as Waltke and O’Connor (B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction*, §24.3) is nothing more than an attempt to see a uniform function in the Piel stem, ignoring the fundamental distinction between active and stative verbs in the Semitic languages. A quick glance at the examples supposedly demonstrating a transitive-resultative contrast between the Qal and Piel stems shows that the Qal is used to designate a non-repeated action or an action with one object whereas the Piel is used to denote plurality. A clear example of this can be seen in Gen 15:10: the Piel of בָּהַר is used to describe Abraham’s cutting of multiple animals—a heifer, a goat, and a ram—but the Qal of בָּהַר is used to describe cutting the birds, referred to as a collective (הַצֶּפֶר).

<sup>10</sup> S. Kaufman, “Semitics,” p. 282.

<sup>11</sup> J. H. Walton, “The Place of the *hutqattēl* within the D-Stem Group and Its Implications in Deuteronomy 24:4,” *HS* 32 (1991): 8.

<sup>12</sup> S. Kaufman, “Semitics,” p. 282. The Piel can also be denominative, enabling the creation of new verbs from a nominal root (E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §52h; P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §52d; B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction*, §24.4). However, this is a grammatical rather than lexical category, and Piel stem verbs that are denominative may or may not fit within the typical categories of the Piel.

<sup>13</sup> E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §§54e–f; P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §53i; B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction*, §26.2. Less frequently, the Hitpael can be used passively. However, such usages are quite rare (E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §54g; P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §53i; B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction*, §26.3a) and characteristic of later biblical literature, perhaps under the influence of Aramaic, which uses *t*-infixes to indicate the passive voice. By the time of rabbinic Hebrew, the Hitpael is consistently used passively rather than reflexively; see B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction*, §26.1.3; M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (1927; Ancient Language Resources; repr. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2001), pp. 62–64.

tive with a passive undersubject, the undersubject of the Hitpael stem is passive and the subject makes, declares, or considers itself to be in the state expressed by the verbal root.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.2 The Piel, Niphal, and Hitpael Stems of בָּרַךְ

Regardless of its possible origin as a denominative,<sup>15</sup> grammarians and lexicographers have long noted that the root בָּרַךְ primarily has a factitive or declarative-estimative function in the Piel stem, meaning “make blessed,” “declare blessed,” or “consider blessed.”<sup>16</sup> The root בָּרַךְ therefore belongs to the stative rather than active category of verbs, and like other stative verbs, the Piel stem of בָּרַךְ is active with a passive undersubject: the subject makes, declares, or considers the undersubject to be in the state of being blessed.<sup>17</sup> Thus, בָּרַךְ is not limited to verbally pronouncing blessing utterances, even though it may often entail this.

The Niphal of בָּרַךְ has been understood with a variety of meanings: “bless themselves” (reflexive), “bless each other” (reciprocal), “receive blessing” or “become blessed” (middle), and “be blessed” (passive).<sup>18</sup> In light of the fact that the Niphal stem is almost always medio-passive rather than reflexive or reciprocal, it is unlikely that the Niphal of בָּרַךְ should be understood as reflexive or reciprocal. Admittedly, rarity should not be used as the only criterion for evaluation. However, if the Niphal of בָּרַךְ is to be understood as reflexive or reciprocal and thus an exception to the general rule, a plausible basis by which to do so must exist.

The few possible examples of reflexive Niphals in the Hebrew Bible are largely limited to verbs relating to exchange and contact, which are not analogous to the verb בָּרַךְ because, as noted above, they behave as active rather than stative verbs. Given the paucity of reflexive Niphals in the

<sup>14</sup> J. Walton, “Place of the *hutqaṭṭēl*,” p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> W. J. Gerber, *Die hebräischen Verba denominativa insbesondere im theologischen Sprachgebrauch des Alten Testaments: Ein lexikographische Studie* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1896), pp. 213–217.

<sup>16</sup> L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson; 4 vols.; Leiden, 1994–1999), pp. 159–160; P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §52d; C. A. Keller and G. Wehmeier, “בָּרַךְ *brk pi.* to bless,” *TLOT* 1:270; E. Jenni, *Das hebräische Piʿel: Syntaktisch-semasiologische Untersuchung einer Verbalform im Alten Testament* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968), pp. 216–217. These definitions apply when people are the object of blessing. When God is the object of blessing, the semantics differ somewhat because God is not “blessed” in the same way as people are; rather, he is “praised.” However, because all the examples that are dealt with in this study entail people as the object of blessing, these definitions are applicable.

<sup>17</sup> The root בָּרַךְ belongs to the stative category of verbs despite the existence of the Qal passive participle form בָּרוּךְ, which is best considered a frozen form typically found in liturgical contexts.

<sup>18</sup> See below for a more detailed discussion of the various interpretations of the Niphal of בָּרַךְ.

Hebrew Bible and the absence of any analogy that would suggest reading the Niphal of בָּרַךְ reflexively, it is thus unlikely that the Niphal of בָּרַךְ should be understood as reflexive.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, as noted above, the Niphal only has a reciprocal function in the case of a few verbs in which interaction between two parties is described. One might argue that because the Niphal of דִּבֵּר is used reciprocally (Ps 119:23; Ezek 33:30; Mal 3:13, 16) and that because both דִּבֵּר and בָּרַךְ relate to speech acts, the Niphal of בָּרַךְ could also be taken reciprocally. Unlike בָּרַךְ, however, the Piel of דִּבֵּר is not factitive and does not belong to the category of stative verbs. Therefore, comparison with the root דִּבֵּר does not provide a plausible analogy by which the Niphal of בָּרַךְ could be understood as reciprocal.

Thus, it is unlikely that the Niphal of בָּרַךְ should be understood as reflexive or reciprocal. In accordance with the usual function of the Niphal in biblical Hebrew, it should instead be taken as middle or passive. Because בָּרַךְ belongs to the stative rather than active verb category, the Niphal of this root might be expected to be ingressive. However, it may not be possible to distinguish clearly between the passive and ingressive in this case.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the Niphal of בָּרַךְ should be understood more generally as medio-passive, being translated either as “be blessed” or “become blessed.”

Given the general classification of בָּרַךְ as a stative rather than active verb, it follows that the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ should function analogously to the Hitpael

<sup>19</sup> The Niphal of שָׁאַל, which some have argued functions as a benefactive (indirect) reflexive (e.g., D. M. Carr, review of K. N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context*, *JBL* 123 [2004]: 43; J. Schreiner, “Segen für die Völker in der Verheißung an die Väter,” *BZ* 6 [1962]: 7), is not a valid analogy to the Niphal of בָּרַךְ. The precise meaning of the Niphal of שָׁאַל in 1 Sam 20:6, 28; Neh 13:6 is unclear; the syntactical structure of these verses is not the same as those in which the Niphal of בָּרַךְ occurs, and שָׁאַל is unlikely to be analogous because it does not belong to the class of stative verbs like בָּרַךְ does. Similarly, the analogies of the Niphal of כָּבַד (e.g., Exod 14:18; 2 Sam 6:20; Ezek 28:22) and of קָרַשׁ (e.g., Isa 5:16; Ezek 20:41) are irrelevant because arguments that they are reflexive rely solely on translation possibilities for a reflexive definition (cf. S. W. Boyd, “A Synchronic Analysis,” pp. 148–150, 152–154).

<sup>20</sup> Some scholars have asserted that the Niphal must be middle because the Pual would be used if the true passive were intended. See, for example, H. W. Wolff, “The Kerygma of the Yahwist,” trans. Wilbur A. Benware, *Int* 20 (1966): 137; J. Schreiner, “Segen für die Völker,” pp. 6–7; J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), pp. 244–245. However, the Niphal may occasionally be used in place of the Pual (E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §51f; P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §52c), and it is difficult to determine what, if any, is the precise distinction between the Niphal and Pual stems of בָּרַךְ. The Pual of בָּרַךְ occurs only thirteen times in the Hebrew Bible, and several of these occurrences are found in poetry or contexts that may reflect dialectal nuances (e.g., Num 22:6; Deut 33:13; Judg 5:24). Alternatively, it is also possible that the usage of the Niphal of בָּרַךְ, which occurs only in the perfect in the Hebrew Bible, reflects the preference of the Niphal for the perfect and the Pual for the imperfect with roots in which the Niphal occurs in semantic relationship to the Piel (P. A. Siebesma, *The Function of the Niphal in Biblical Hebrew in Relationship to Other Passive-Reflexive Verbal Stems and to the Pu‘al and Hoph‘al in Particular* [SSN 28; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1991], pp. 134–135).

of other stative verbs, denoting reflexive action with a passive undersubject: “make/declare/consider oneself to be blessed.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than denoting simple speech acts, the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ thus designates a reflexive action by which a state of blessing is estimated, declared, or achieved. Whether the subject regards himself as blessed by another, declares himself blessed by another, or makes himself blessed by another depends on the context. However, these definitions are closely connected due to the performative nature of the verb בָּרַךְ in Biblical Hebrew.

This understanding of the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ in Biblical Hebrew may be further supported by comparison with available cognate evidence. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ is used reflexively in 1QS II:13 with the meaning “consider oneself blessed.”<sup>22</sup> In classical Arabic, the fifth stem corresponds generally to the Biblical Hebrew Hitpael in morphology and meaning.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore noteworthy that stem V of the root برك in classical Arabic often means “regard one as a means of obtaining a blessing” or “look for a blessing by means of someone,” the preposition ب being used to denote the person or thing by which blessing is sought.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, the Ethpael stem of ܒܪܟ in Syriac, which corresponds morphologically to the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ in Biblical Hebrew, is used with the meaning “be blessed” as well as “receive a blessing” or “seek a blessing.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, parallel forms in cognate languages evince a definition in which the subject considers itself to be blessed by another or makes itself to be blessed (i.e., seeks blessing) by means of another. This suggests, at the very least, the plausibility for such a meaning of the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ in Biblical Hebrew.

In contrast, many scholars have argued that the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ means “bless oneself,” assuming that a blessing is uttered by using the name of one

<sup>21</sup> C. Keller and G. Wehmeier, *TLOT* 1:274. Notable analogies include the verbs טָהַר, שָׁמַח, and קָדַשׁ, which, like בָּרַךְ, relate to one’s social or religious status. These verbs function identically in the Piel and Hitpael stems: the Piel is active, the Hitpael is reflexive, and the undersubject is the passive recipient for both stems. Like בָּרַךְ, these verbs are factitive and often performative. For a general summary of these “verbs of status” as they function in the Niphal, Piel, and Hitpael stems, see S. W. Boyd, “A Synchronic Analysis,” pp. 147–155, 276.

<sup>22</sup> The occurrence in 1QS II:13 may be an allusion to Deut 29:18[19], which uses the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ reflexively with the meaning “consider oneself blessed.” The Hitpael of בָּרַךְ is used passively (וַיִּתְּבַרְךְ שְׁמֶיךָ) in 4Q448 II:9 and with an uncertain meaning in 4Q525 14 II:7, where it occurs in a fragmentary context.

<sup>23</sup> C. P. Caspari, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* (ed. and trans. W. Wright; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; 2 vols. London: Williams & Norgate, 1874–1875), 1:37–39.

<sup>24</sup> E. W. Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (8 vols.; reprint; London: 1968), p. 193. The verb برك has a similar meaning in modern Arabic, in which it can be used with a passive (“be blessed”) or reflexive (“ask someone’s blessing”) meaning; see H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (ed. J. M. Cowan; 4<sup>th</sup> ed.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979), p. 67.

<sup>25</sup> R. P. Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (ed. J. P. Smith; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), pp. 55–56.



who exemplifies blessing, indicated by the preposition ב. A connection between the Hitpael and blessing utterance is supposedly supported by pointing to Jacob's blessing upon Joseph's sons, in which the Piel is used in conjunction with uttering blessings by another's name: "By you Israel will utter blessings (יְבָרֵךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל), saying, 'May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh'" (Gen 48:20). However, a semantic connection between Gen 48:20 and the occurrences of the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ cannot automatically be assumed.<sup>26</sup> This association presupposes that the function of the preposition ב is the same in Gen 48:20 as it is when the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ occurs, which may or may not be the case.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the view that the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ means "bless oneself by the name of another" makes several questionable assumptions concerning the relationship between Gen 48:20 and the usage of the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ. It overlooks comparative evidence from other Semitic languages and ignores the factitive nature of בָּרַךְ, limiting its meaning entirely to the realm of speech acts.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, this understanding is not consistent with the way in which the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ is used in the Hebrew Bible. The Hitpael of בָּרַךְ is used four times outside of Genesis (Deut 29:18[19]; Ps 72:17; Isa 65:16; Jer 4:2), and therefore it is instructive to examine these occurrences.

### 2.2.1 Deuteronomy 29:18[19]

Deuteronomy 29:18[19] reads: "He considers himself blessed in his heart (וְהִתְבָּרַךְ בְּלִבּוֹ), thinking, 'I am safe.'" In other words, this individual regards himself as blessed, thinking everything is okay even though the context makes it evident that he has broken God's covenant. As many acknowledge, Deut 29:18[19] provides a clear example in which the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ means "consider oneself blessed" rather than "bless oneself" or "be blessed."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Compare S. W. Boyd, "A Synchronic Analysis," pp. 11–12.

<sup>27</sup> C. W. Mitchell, *The Meaning of brk "to Bless" in the Old Testament* (SBLDS 95; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 84–85; T. B. Plassmann, *The Signification of b<sup>e</sup>rākā: A Semasiological Study of the Semitic Stem b-r-k* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1913), p. 155.

<sup>28</sup> Similarly, there is no grammatical basis or evidence from other Semitic languages to support Grüneberg's contention that the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ functions as a speech action middle, denoting the utterance of a blessing (K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, p. 220).

<sup>29</sup> L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, pp. 159–160; J. Scharbert, "בָּרַךְ brk; בְּרָכָה b<sup>e</sup>rākāh," *TDOT* 2:296; C. Keller and G. Wehmeier, *TLOT* 1:274; C. W. Mitchell, *Meaning of brk*, p. 124; S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (ICC; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), p. 325; J. H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, Pa.: Jewish Publication

### 2.2.2 Psalm 72:17

Recent analysis of Psalm 72 has focused on its structure and content vis-à-vis ancient Near Eastern ideologies of kingship, in which the king is portrayed as a mediator of prosperity and blessing.<sup>30</sup> While the specific structure of this psalm is debated, many scholars acknowledge that verses 8–11 constitute a distinct unit portraying the king's international domination. These verses, which describe the world's nations as ingratiating themselves to the king in terms of submission, service, and tribute, are structurally and thematically linked to verse 17b.<sup>31</sup> In light of this, the parallelism of וַיְהַבְּרְכוּ with יִשְׁרְרוּהוּ should be understood in terms of ingratiation: "May all the nations make themselves blessed by him (וַיְהַבְּרְכוּ בּוֹ כָּל-גּוֹיִם); may they call him blessed (יִשְׁרְרוּהוּ)!"<sup>32</sup> The preposition ב signifies the instrument of blessing since the king is the one whom the people rely upon for blessing and favor. This understanding of the Hitpa'el of בִּרַךְ logically follows from the structural arrangement of the psalm and brings out its reciprocal nature: the king is portrayed as a mediator of blessing, and the people respond by currying favor and seeking his blessing. Thus, the point of this verse is not the uttering of blessings, but the nations' acts of ingratiation as a response to the king's role as mediator of blessing.

### 2.2.3 Isaiah 65:16

Isaiah 65:16 concludes an oracle portraying a contrast between God's servants and the rebellious (Isa 65:13–16): whereas the names of the rebellious will be used in curse formulae, God will call his servants by another name (Isa. 65:15). This hearkens back to Isa 62:2, in which God promises to call Zion by another name, causing the nations to notice God's favor upon the city. While some might argue that the usage of curse formulae followed

---

Society, 1996), pp. 279–280, 399; D. L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12* (WBC 6B; Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2002), p. 720.

<sup>30</sup> For example, M. Arneth, "Psalm 72 in seinen altorientalischen Kontexten," in "Mein Sohn bist du" (*Ps 2,7*): *Studien zu den Königspsalmen* (ed. E. Otto and E. Zenger; SBS 192; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 2002), pp. 135–172; B. Janowski, "Die Frucht der Gerechtigkeit: Psalm 72 und die jüdische Königsideologie," in "Mein Sohn bist du" (*Ps 2,7*): *Studien zu den Königspsalmen* (ed. E. Otto and E. Zenger; SBS 192; Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 2002), pp. 94–134; cf. R. E. Murphy, *A Study of Psalm 72(71)* (Studies in Sacred Theology 12; Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1948), pp. 45–78.

<sup>31</sup> E. S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL 15; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 67; F.-L. Hossfeld and E. Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100* (trans. L. M. Maloney; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), pp. 206–208, 218; A. Flury-Schölch, *Abrahams Segen und die Völker*, pp. 197–208.

<sup>32</sup> J. Scharbert, *TDOT 2:296*; C. Mitchell, *Meaning of brk*, p. 103; A. Flury-Schölch, *Abrahams Segen und die Völker*, p. 220; T. Plassmann, *Signification of b<sup>c</sup>rākā*, pp. 151–152.

by the renaming of God's servants implies the usage of the servants' new name in blessing formulae, there is no indication that this is the case. Rather, there is a clear change in the object of attention. In what follows, the focus shifts to God, and the result<sup>33</sup> of the renaming of his servants is described in verse 16a: "the one who makes himself blessed by the land will make himself blessed by the God of faithfulness (הַמְתַּבָּרֵךְ בְּאֶרֶץ יְהוָה בְּאֱלֹהֵי אֱמֻנָה), and the one who swears an oath by the land will swear by the God of faithfulness (וְהַנִּשְׁבַּע בְּאֶרֶץ יִשְׁבַּע בְּאֱלֹהֵי אֱמֻנָה)."

Thus, the reputation and character of God's servants will be such that other people will not praise them, but instead will be drawn to the God seen in them.<sup>34</sup> Again, this reflects the basic thrust of Isa 62:2, in which the nations recognize God's favor of Jerusalem and respond accordingly. Because taking an oath constitutes an act of commitment, those who take an oath demonstrate their reliance upon God (rather than some other object, such as the land) as the one who is faithful.<sup>35</sup> Given the parallelism, therefore, the usage of the Hitpa'el of בָּרַךְ expresses reliance upon God and the seeking of blessing from him.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the point of this verse is not only that speech acts are being performed, but also that people are expressing trust and reliance upon God by swearing oaths and invoking his blessing.

#### 2.2.4 Jeremiah 4:2

Many scholars have argued that the multiple oracles of Jer 3:1–4:4 constitute a coherent literary unit in their current form, as indicated by the repeated usage of the verb שָׁיב.<sup>37</sup> This unit draws near to a conclusion with a series of conditional statements in Jer 4:1–2. Although the syntax of verses 1–2 is debated, it is probable that verse 2b constitutes the apodosis to the conditions of verses 1–2a.<sup>38</sup> If Israel repents, which manifests itself in turn-

<sup>33</sup> Given the context, many commentators see אֲשֶׁר here as causal (B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction*, §§38.3b–c; cf. Gen 11:7; 13:16; Mal 3:19[4:1]) rather than a relative particle. See J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 56–66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 19B; New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 282; J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 643.

<sup>34</sup> J. N. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, p. 651; J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity, 1993), p. 529.

<sup>35</sup> J. A. Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC 18; Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity, 1999), p. 397.

<sup>36</sup> J. A. Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, pp. 528–529; cf. C. Keller and G. Wehmeier, *TLOT* 1:274; C. Mitchell, *Meaning of brk*, p. 125.

<sup>37</sup> P. C. Craigie, P. H. Kelley, and J. F. Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1–25* (WBC 26; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1991), pp. 47–48.

<sup>38</sup> W. L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1–25* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 126–128. Despite the fact that Jer 4:2a uses the perfect consecutive whereas the protases in verse 1 use אִם along with an imperfect verb, the switch to the

ing away from idols and swearing oaths by God's name instead of wavering in religious commitment, "then the nations will make themselves blessed by him"<sup>39</sup> (וְהָתְבָרְכוּ בּוֹ גּוֹיִם), and in him they will boast (וּבּוֹ יִתְהַלְלוּ).<sup>40</sup>

This translation of וְהָתְבָרְכוּ is supported by its parallelism with יִתְהַלְלוּ. The Hitpael of הָלַל typically means "boast" in the Hebrew Bible, but several of its occurrences indicate that it has connotations of trusting, often in God (Ps 49:7[6]; Jer 9:22–23[23–24]), as well as rejoicing (Ps 63:12[11]; 105:3; Isa 41:6).<sup>41</sup> If the nations pride themselves in God, placing their trust in him and finding their happiness in him, the parallelism indicates that the nations likewise seek out blessing from him. Once again, the point is not that blessings or statements of praise are being uttered, even though this may occur. Rather, the point is that the nations are placing their trust in God and seeking his blessing. This understanding is coherent within the larger context of this literary unit, in which Jer 3:17 refers to the inclusion of the nations within God's blessing. Jeremiah thus expresses the view Israel will provoke the nations to jealousy (cf. Isa 19:24–25): when Israel repents, the nations will see how Israel benefits from its covenant relationship and seek to enter into that relationship in order to also obtain blessing from God.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, as analysis of these passages demonstrates, the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ designates a reflexive action by which the state of blessing is estimated, declared, or achieved; it does not only designate speech acts. Rather than supporting a blessing utterance paradigm, these passages actually suggest otherwise: if a person is considering, declaring, or making himself blessed by another, the source of blessing is located outside of that person and one must look to another person or object that is an instrument—not simply an example—of blessing.<sup>43</sup>

---

third person in 4:2b as well as the chiasmic structure of verse 2b indicate that verse 2b and not verse 2a constitutes the apodosis. The perfect consecutive can be used to continue a conditional statement (B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction*, §32.2.1c), so its usage in 4:2a need not be taken as signaling the beginning of the protasis.

<sup>39</sup> W. L. Holladay, *Jeremiah*, p. 129. Although some have argued that בּוֹ should be emended to בָּהֶם, assuming Israel as the referent, there is no manuscript evidence for this. The shift in divine speech from first (Jer 4:1) to third person (Jer 4:2) is paralleled in Jer 2:2–3 and may have come about here by influence of the third person of the oath.

<sup>40</sup> L. C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2008), pp. 59–61; C. Mitchell, *Meaning of brk*, pp. 55–56; T. Plassmann, *Signification of b'ṣrākā*, pp. 151–152.

<sup>41</sup> H. Ringgren, "הָלַל *hl* I and II; הִלְלוּ *hillūlim*; תְּהַלֵּל *ṭhillāh*," *TDOT* 3:409–410.

<sup>42</sup> J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 213; C. Mitchell, *Meaning of brk*, pp. 55–56.

<sup>43</sup> This is probably why the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ is rendered as a passive by the ancient versions in Ps 72:17; Isa 65:16; Jer 4:2. The Hitpael functions as an effective reflexive in these passages; while its usage in the Masoretic Text places the emphasis on the role of the subject in obtaining blessing, the end result is that the

### 3. THE NIPHAL AND HITPAEL OF בָּרַךְ IN THE PATRIARCHAL PROMISES OF BLESSING AND THE NATIONS

#### 3.1 Genesis 12:3

It is now possible to examine the usage of the Niphal (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14) and Hitpael (Gen 22:18; 26:4) of בָּרַךְ in the Genesis narratives. In Gen 12:3, God commands Abraham to leave his land, promising blessing and greatness vis-à-vis the nations: “Go...so that<sup>44</sup> you might be a blessing, that I might bless those who bless you, also cursing the one who disdains you. Then all the families of the earth will be blessed through you (וְנִבְרַכְתָּ וְכָל מִשְׁפָּחַת הָאָדָמָה (בָּרַךְ כָּל מִשְׁפָּחַת הָאָדָמָה)).” The *crux interpretum* of this passage is the diathesis of the Niphal perfect consecutive verb (וְנִבְרַכְתָּ) in the very last clause (Gen 12:3). Scholars and translators have understood this verb’s voice as passive, middle, reflexive, or reciprocal. Those who translate the Niphal as passive (“all the families of the earth will be blessed by you”)<sup>45</sup> or middle (“all the families of the earth will find blessing in you”)<sup>46</sup> see Abraham as the means or instrument of bringing blessing to the nations (NRSV, NIV, TNIV, NASB, NKJV, ESV, ASV, CEV, NAB). Scholars and translators who translate the Niphal reflexively (“all the families of the earth will bless them-

---

subject itself becomes blessed, the sense highlighted by the ancient versions. See T. Plassmann, *Signification of b<sup>h</sup>rākā*, p. 159.

<sup>44</sup> A volitive followed by a *waw*-volitive typically expresses purpose or result; see E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §110f; P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §§116f, h; S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), p. 69. For a detailed discussion of the syntax of these verses, see W. Yarchin, “Imperative and Promise in Genesis 12:1–3,” *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 10 (1980): 164–178.

<sup>45</sup> G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. J. H. Marks; OTL; Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 160; N. M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, Pa.: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 89; S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.; WC; London: Methuen, 1916), p. 145; U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part 2: From Noah to Abraham* (trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), p. 315; V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 374–376; E. König, *Die Genesis: eingeleitet, übersetzt und erklärt* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1925), pp. 457–458; J. Chaine, *Le Livre de la Genèse* (LD 3; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1948), pp. 180–182; L. A. Turner, *Genesis* (Readings: A New Biblical Commentary; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), p. 64.

<sup>46</sup> G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987), pp. 277–278; J. J. Scullion, *Genesis: A Commentary for Students, Teachers, and Preachers* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 110; W. S. Towner, *Genesis* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp. 135–136; B. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), p. 177; O. Procksch, *Die Genesis übersetzt und erklärt* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Leipzig: Deichersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1924), pp. 96–97; J. E. Hartley, *Genesis* (NIBCOT 1; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000), pp. 133, 136.

selves by you”) or reciprocally (“all the families of the earth will bless each other by you”)<sup>47</sup> suggest that others will utter blessing using Abraham’s name and desire to be like him because he will become the example *par excellence* of blessing, having been greatly blessed by God (RSV, NJB, NET, NJPS).

Many ancient translations adopt a passive translation for Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14. The Septuagintal tradition and the New Testament (Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8) understand the Hebrew text as a passive, using the verbal form ἐνευλογηθήσονται.<sup>48</sup> The Vulgate likewise uses a passive form (*benedicentur*). The Niphal of בִּרַךְ is translated by the Targums (*Tg. Onq.*, *Tg. Neof.*, *Tg. Ps.-J.*) as the passive *Dt*-stem (יִתְבָּרֵךְ), and the Peshitta uses a passive form (ܒܪܟܬܐ).

In contrast to these ancient versions, many modern scholars and translators interpret the Niphal of בִּרַךְ reflexively, pointing to the occurrences of the Hitpael of בִּרַךְ in the patriarchal promises and arguing that the similarities of these promises to those with the Niphal require both stems to have the same voice. Based on its four occurrences outside of Genesis, they argue that the Hitpael of בִּרַךְ is reflexive and denotes blessing utterance. This understanding is supported by comparison with Gen 48:20, in which the Piel is used in conjunction with uttering blessings by another’s name. Advocates of blessing utterance note apparent lexical overlap between the Niphal and Hitpael stems of various roots, contending that overlap is also likely with the root בִּרַךְ. Given their understanding of blessing utterance for the Hitpael, they assert that it should be used to interpret the voice of the Niphal.

However, this line of argumentation is flawed on several counts. First, there is no basis for giving the Hitpael preference over the Niphal. If the

<sup>47</sup> C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (trans. J. J. Scullion; CC; Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1985), pp. 151–152; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 85–86; J. Skinner, *Genesis*, pp. 244–245; H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. M. E. Biddle; Mercer Library of Biblical Studies; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997), pp. 164–165; F. Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (trans. S. Taylor; 2 vols.; Clark’s Foreign Theological Library, New Series 36–37; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1888–1889), 1:378–380; B. Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis* (ed. and trans. E. I. Jacob and W. Jacob; New York: Ktav, 1974), pp. 85–87; A. Dillmann, *Genesis: Critically and Exegetically Expounded* (trans. W. B. Stevenson; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), 2:11–12; H. Holzinger, *Genesis* (KHC 1; Freiburg: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1898), p. 137; J. G. Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12–50* (ITC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 16; R. Davidson, *Genesis 12–50* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 20.

<sup>48</sup> Admittedly, in Hellenistic Greek the aorist and future passive forms became commonly used for the aorist and future middle forms (F. W. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [trans. and rev. R. W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], §§77–79). Thus, it is possible that the Septuagint and New Testament intend the middle rather than passive voice.

claim is going to be made that the Niphal and Hitpael have the same meaning, one could just as easily argue that the Hitpael should be interpreted in light of the Niphal rather than vice versa. In any case, it is wrong methodologically to assume that the Niphal and Hitpael stems have the same diathesis simply because the different formulations of the patriarchal promise of blessing are similar and because the Niphal and Hitpael stems often appear to overlap semantically. While alike, the various promises of blessing are not entirely identical. Accordingly, some scholars have argued that there are contextual reasons for usage of the different stems given the lack of clear evidence for a diachronic or source critical explanation.<sup>49</sup> Lastly, as noted above, a relationship between the Hitpael and blessing utterance assumes an unproven connection with Gen 48:20.

Moreover, as already argued, it is unlikely that the Niphal of בִּרַךְ is reflexive or reciprocal because there are no clear analogies in the Hebrew Bible of the Niphal being used in such a manner. At best, the Niphal of בִּרַךְ in Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14 could only be an indirect, not direct, semantic reflexive because the subject is not both the true agent and direct object. Within the context of these passages, the ultimate agent by which blessing is bestowed is God. In genuine direct semantic reflexives, the agent most often *immediately* affects itself, which is not the case in the three instances in which the Niphal of בִּרַךְ occurs. Moreover, semantic reflexives are rare in contexts in which a different agent occupies the preceding linguistic utterance, as is the case here.<sup>50</sup> These two observations make the reflexive trans-

---

<sup>49</sup> R. Benton, "Niphal and Hitpael of בִּרַךְ," pp. 13–14; K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, pp. 242–243; J. H. Walton, *Genesis* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), pp. 393–394; M. D. Carroll R., "Blessing the Nations: Toward a Biblical Theology of Mission from Genesis," *BBR* 10 (2000): 23–24; P. R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and Its Covenantal Development in Genesis* (JSOTSup 315; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 227–228.

While several scholars have argued that the use of the Hitpael reflects a later conception of Israel's relationship with the nations (G. Wehmeier, "The Theme 'Blessing for the Nations' in the Promises to the Patriarchs and in Prophetic Literature," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 6 [1974]: 10–11; W. A. Vogels, *God's Universal Covenant: A Biblical Study* [Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1979], pp. 42–46; J. Schreiner, "Segen für die Völker," pp. 9–10), current knowledge does not enable us to attribute definitively the usage of the different stems to different provenances or time periods. Westermann cautions that "the tradition-historical relationship of these passages has not yet been clarified," noting the difficulties with such an approach (C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, pp. 151–152). These difficulties are reflected in the fact that there is no clearly established consensus among scholars on the identity of the redactor(s) of these passages. One of the most recent attempts to reconstruct the textual history of the patriarchal promises of blessing is found in A. Flury-Schölch, *Abrahams Segen und die Völker*, pp. 225–318. Flury-Schölch's survey of current theories and own hypothesis demonstrate the multiplicity of views on this subject and the complexities that any diachronic reconstruction entails.

<sup>50</sup> S. W. Boyd, "A Synchronic Analysis," pp. 154–155.

lation of “bless themselves” very unlikely, leaving a medio-passive diathesis as the most plausible option.

The structure and logic of Gen 12:3 and its context also support such an understanding. Set against the backdrop of Genesis 1–11, the final-form narrative of Genesis shifts to the character of Abraham. In Gen 12:1–3, God tells Abraham to go from his land, kindred, and father’s household to a different land. In turn, God provides a promise of assurance for Abraham’s obedience, guaranteeing his greatness and security: he will become a great nation and will have a great reputation, and he will be so blessed by God that he will be considered the model *par excellence* of God’s blessing (Gen 12:2).<sup>51</sup> Abraham’s greatness is also the main thrust of verse 3a, in which God assures Abraham that those who attempt to curse him will in turn be cursed, while those who bless him will be blessed.<sup>52</sup> Those who bless Abraham will recognize the extent to which he has been blessed and seek his favor by blessing him rather than cursing him. What began as a promise of protection to Abraham thus logically shifts to describing Abraham’s greatness and protection vis-à-vis his interaction with others.<sup>53</sup>

As suggested by the usage of the perfect consecutive, which typically indicates temporal or logical sequence,<sup>54</sup> the divine promise comes to its culmination in Gen 12:3b.<sup>55</sup> Here, God promises that Abraham will be so greatly blessed that he and his descendants will even become the means by which God’s blessing is extended to others. As such, there is an outward expansion of blessing that includes not only Abraham and his descendants but also those around him.<sup>56</sup> A reflexive or reciprocal translation does not account for this logical progression that the perfect consecutive indicates and creates redundancy by mentioning twice (Gen 12:2d and 3b) that Abraham is

<sup>51</sup> Synchronic analysis indicates that being a בִּרְכָה among others elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible refers to being an example rather than source of blessing to others (Ps 21:7[6]; 37:26; Isa 19:24; Zech 8:13), suggesting that this is also the meaning in Gen 12:2. See C. Keller and G. Wehmeier, *TLOT* 1:276; C. Mitchell, *Meaning of brk*, p. 30; K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, pp. 121, 170.

<sup>52</sup> C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, pp. 150–151; T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 120–121.

<sup>53</sup> Compare G. von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 159–160; K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, pp. 178–179.

<sup>54</sup> E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §112a; P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §§119c, e; B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction*, §32.1.3.

<sup>55</sup> H. Wolff, “Kerygma of the Yahwist,” p. 138; P. D. Miller, Jr., “Syntax and Theology in Genesis XII 3a,” *VT* 34 (1984): 472; W. Yarchin, “Imperative and Promise,” pp. 170–171.

<sup>56</sup> A. Murtonen, “The Use and Meaning of the Words *ʾbārēk* and *bʿrākāh* in the Old Testament,” *VT* 9 (1959): 160; K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, p. 171; C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, p. 149; cf. H. Wolff, “Kerygma of the Yahwist,” pp. 138–140.



an example of God's blessing.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the context and logic support a medio-passive rather than reflexive rendering of the Niphal of בִּרַךְ in Gen 12:3.

### 3.2 Genesis 18:18 and Genesis 28:14

The other occurrences of the Niphal of בִּרַךְ in Gen 18:18 and 28:14 also are found within contexts that best support a medio-passive translation. In Genesis 18, after promising Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son by the next year, God asks whether he should hide his intentions to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah from Abraham (Gen 18:17). God concludes that he should not hide his intentions because Abraham will become a great nation and because all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him (וְיִבְרַכְּךָ וְכָל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן (בְּזֶלְ גִּזְרֵי הָאָרֶץ) (Gen 18:18). The pericope continues with Abraham's intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah given the condition that righteous individuals may be found there (Gen 18:23–33). While Sodom and Gomorrah are not delivered from destruction in the end,<sup>58</sup> the context nevertheless links potential blessing of others to Abraham's intercession (Gen 18:18).<sup>59</sup> There are no indications in this pericope that the nations will hear of the events and recognize that Abraham is blessed or utter blessings in his name, nor are there any suggestions that the nations will even act to utter blessings.<sup>60</sup> In fact, such statements would be out of place within the context here.<sup>61</sup> Thus, blessing mediation is the most appropriate interpretative paradigm, and the medio-passive voice is the most plausible diathesis for the Niphal in Gen 18:18.

Genesis 28:14 is found within the narrative concerning Jacob's journey to Haran in order to find a wife. Jacob stops at Bethel to rest, and God appears

<sup>57</sup> V. Hamilton, *Genesis*, p. 374; E. König, *Die Genesis*, p. 458; A. Murtonen, "l̥bārēk and b̥rākāh," p. 160; C. Mitchell, *Meaning of brk*, p. 32. Redundancy is not avoided by claiming that the promise expands from an unknown extent (Gen 12:2) to worldwide renown (Gen 12:3), *contra* K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, p. 178. Similarly, the change in syntax evident through the usage of the perfect consecutive in 12:3b argues against the presence of repetition for emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> The fact that Sodom and Gomorrah are not blessed reflects the fact that "the nations will not receive blessing if they persist in wickedness; that the promise of blessing does not mean that issues of justice and divine judgement can be ignored" (K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, p. 78).

<sup>59</sup> K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, pp. 75–77, 185, 244; G. Wehmeier, "Theme 'Blessing for the Nations,'" p. 6; V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 18; C. Mitchell, *Meaning of brk*, p. 34; cf. H. Wolff, "Kerygma of the Yahwist," pp. 147–148; M. E. Biddle, "The 'Endangered Ancestress' and Blessing for the Nations," *JBL* 109 (1990): 609.

<sup>60</sup> K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, pp. 75–76.

<sup>61</sup> G. Wehmeier, "Theme 'Blessing for the Nations,'" p. 6.

to him in a dream, promising him that his descendants will inherit the land where he now lies (Gen 28:13–14). This emphasis on land is unique among the patriarchal promises in which the Niphal stem of בִּרַךְ is used, although it is not surprising since Jacob is leaving the land that his ancestors Abraham and Isaac dwelt in, the land that God had promised to give to them. God promises to Jacob that the land will be inhabited by his numerous offspring, in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed (וְנִבְרַכְּךָ בְּךָ כָּל־מִשְׁפָּחָה (הָאֲדָמָה וּבְיִצְחָק)). While this promise is distinctive in terms of its emphasis on land, it essentially reiterates God's original promise to Abraham: the wording of the final clause here (בְּךָ כָּל־מִשְׁפָּחָה הָאֲדָמָה) is precisely the same as that of Gen 12:3b, with only the addition of וּבְיִצְחָק at the very end of the clause.<sup>62</sup> Continuity is also implied by Isaac's statement that God will grant Jacob the blessing of Abraham (Gen 28:4) and by God's own statement directly preceding the promise that he is the God of Abraham and of Isaac (Gen 28:13). Thus, it is likely that the meaning here is the same as that of Gen 12:3 and that the Niphal should again be interpreted as medio-passive.<sup>63</sup>

Significantly, the broader narratives surrounding the character of Jacob never mention the usage of his name in blessing, but they do demonstrate that others are blessed or cursed depending on their interaction with him. For example, Laban recognizes that he has been blessed by God because of Jacob (Gen 30:27–30) and seeks to be on good terms with him.<sup>64</sup> That this narrative is portrayed as a partial fulfillment of the patriarchal promises is suggested by the peculiar usage of פִּרְיָ, which was used in Gen 28:14 within the framework of God's blessing of Jacob, to refer to Jacob's prosperity in this pericope (Gen 30:30, 43).<sup>65</sup> This fits within a paradigm of blessing mediation and supports a medio-passive diathesis for the Niphal of בִּרַךְ in Gen 28:14.

In conclusion, all three iterations of the promise of blessing and the nations in Genesis with the Niphal stem (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14) are best translated as medio-passive ("be blessed" or "become blessed"), not reflex-

<sup>62</sup> K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, p. 85; cf. H. C. Chew, "The Theme of 'Blessing for the Nations' in the Patriarchal Narratives of Genesis" (Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 1982), pp. 68–69. The addition of וּבְיִצְחָק may not be particularly surprising given the mention of Jacob's offspring being numerous (Gen 28:14), although some scholars argue that וּבְיִצְחָק is a later gloss (e.g., C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, p. 455).

<sup>63</sup> K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, p. 85; cf. G. Wehmeier, "Theme 'Blessing for the Nations,'" p. 6.

<sup>64</sup> K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, p. 85; G. Wehmeier, "Deliverance and Blessing in the Old and New Testament," *IJT* 20 (1971): 37; M. D. Carroll R., "Blessing the Nations," pp. 23–24; C. Mitchell, *Meaning of brk*, p. 70.

<sup>65</sup> G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1994), pp. 255, 257–258.

ive. This is supported by grammatical analysis of the Niphal in the Hebrew Bible as well as the contexts of the promises themselves. As such, they reflect a paradigm of blessing mediation rather than blessing utterance.

### 3.3 Genesis 22:18 and Genesis 26:4

Genesis 22:18 and 26:4 provide close parallels to Gen 12:3, 18:18, and 28:14 but with the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ instead of the Niphal. Several scholars<sup>66</sup> and English translations (NIV, TNIV, NASB, NKJV, ESV, ASV, CEV) understand the Hitpael to be passive in these two verses.<sup>67</sup> However, the Hitpael verbal stem is rarely passive in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>68</sup> The few examples of passive Hitpael that do occur tend to show up in later Biblical Hebrew,<sup>69</sup> but given the debated provenance and dating of the promises in Genesis, it is difficult to prove definitively that the passages containing the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ are later and should be translated passively.

Other scholars<sup>70</sup> and English translations (RSV, NJB, NET, NJPS) advocate a reflexive translation of “bless themselves” for the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ in Gen 22:18 and 26:4, claiming that the nations will utter blessings upon themselves using the names of Abraham and his descendants. However, as discussed above, this understanding is unlikely in light of grammatical considerations as well as analysis of the Hitpael of בָּרַךְ when it occurs outside of Genesis.

<sup>66</sup> B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction*, §23.6.4a; V. Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, p. 375; O. T. Allis, “The Blessing of Abraham,” *PTR* 25 (1927): 295, 297; W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 13–14, 30–32; cf. B. A. McKenzie, “Jacob’s Blessing on Pharaoh: An Interpretation of Gen 46:31–47:26,” *WTJ* 45 (1983): 387.

<sup>67</sup> The Septuagint, Vulgate, Targums (*Tg. Onq.*, *Tg. Neof.*, *Tg. Ps.-J.*), and Peshitta all understand Gen 22:18; 26:4 passively. Similarly, the Greek text of Sir 44:21 alludes to Gen 22:18 with an aorist passive infinitive (ἐνευλογηθήναι), and the Hebrew version of Ben Sira states that God made an oath in order to bless the nations by Abraham’s descendants (לְבָרֶךְ בְּיָדֵינוּ גוֹיִם). These traditions all reflect a blessing mediation, not blessing utterance, paradigm. As noted above, the usage of the passive in the ancient versions is consistent with an understanding of the Hitpael as an effective reflexive in which the subject acts to obtain blessing, meaning that the end result is that the subject becomes blessed.

<sup>68</sup> Allis has claimed that it is not unusual for the Hitpael to be passive and cites thirty-six examples from the Hebrew Bible as proof (O. T. Allis, “Blessing of Abraham,” pp. 281–283). However, not all of the examples that Allis lists need be taken as passive (only twenty-five of these are “true passives” while the other eleven are what he calls “voluntary” passives), and those that are indeed passive may be examples of the Hitpael’s tendency to become passive in later Biblical Hebrew. Regardless, the fact remains that although the Hitpael is occasionally passive in the Hebrew Bible, this usage is rare (E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, §54g; P. Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, §53i; B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction*, §26.3a). Moreover, just because the Hitpael *can* be taken as passive does not mean that it *should* be taken as passive in Gen 22:18; 26:4 as Allis argues.

<sup>69</sup> B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction*, §26.1.3.

<sup>70</sup> For scholars that do so, see many of the works listed above that also interpret the Niphal of בָּרַךְ reflexively.

Rather, as argued above, the Hitpael of בִּרַךְ means “make/declare/consider oneself to be blessed,” describing a reflexive action by which a state of blessing is achieved, declared, or estimated. This is apparent in the promises of blessing in which the Hitpael of בִּרַךְ is used, which emphasize the obedience of Abraham as the grounds for God’s promise (Gen 22:18; 26:5).

In the first narrative, Abraham’s obedience and willingness to offer up his own son becomes the partial basis for God’s promise of blessing (Gen 22:12).<sup>71</sup> In contrast to the promises in which the Niphal is used, the stress is on Abraham’s descendants.<sup>72</sup> The text reads only “your descendants” (בְּנֵי־עֶדְ) without any mention of Abraham being the one by whom the blessing will come as is found in the promises with the Niphal. Nor is there any statement concerning the nations’ relationship to Abraham’s descendants as there was in Gen 12:3. This is primarily a promise of prosperity, domination, and protection in which Abraham’s descendants will become numerous and possess the gates of their enemies (Gen 22:17) because Abraham was obedient.

A stress on the success of Abraham’s descendants fits well with the understanding of the Hitpael of בִּרַךְ that has been proposed, suggesting a different nuance in Gen 22:18 than that of Gen 12:3 and the other passages in which the Niphal is used. The nations see Abraham’s offspring as the ultimate example of God’s blessing because of their abundance and prosperity, considering and making themselves blessed by Abraham’s descendants (וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזֶרְעֶךָ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ). God’s blessing thus flows to the nations through Abraham’s descendants. Rather than negating an overarching understanding of Abraham’s role as an instrument of blessing, Gen 22:18 focuses on the nations’ response to the blessing that God has bestowed upon Abraham’s descendants.

These same emphases are also found in Gen 26:4, the other occurrence of the Hitpael of בִּרַךְ in the patriarchal promises. Before traveling to Philistia because of a famine, God appears to Isaac and expands upon the promise he had given to Abraham in Gen 22:18. God promises him that all the nations of the earth will see the prosperity of his descendants, declaring and making themselves blessed by them (וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזֶרְעֶךָ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ). Once again, God’s motivation for giving the promise is partially grounded in Abraham’s obedi-

<sup>71</sup> That Abraham’s obedient response is in part the basis for God’s giving of the promise is indicated by the usage of יָצַח (Gen 22:16) and עָקַב (Gen 22:18), which both indicate consequence (L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, pp. 421, 873).

<sup>72</sup> P. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations*, pp. 227–228; K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, pp. 229–230.

ent response (Gen 26:5). The emphasis is once more on descendants because only *וְיָרְעָה* is mentioned (Gen 26:4). Lastly, the text again stresses the security and prosperity of the offspring. God's protection is mainly offered in terms of land, which is not surprising since Isaac is leaving the land that God has promised to him for the foreign territory of the Philistines (Gen 26:3–4).<sup>73</sup>

While technically the promise relates to Isaac's offspring, its partial fulfillment is seen in the following narrative, which describes Isaac's deception of Abimelech (Gen 26:12–33). Notably, no mention is made of the Philistines uttering blessings using Isaac's name in this pericope, meaning that an interpretation of blessing utterance for the Hitpael of *בָּרַךְ* in Gen 26:4 is unlikely. On the other hand, blessing mediation is evident, although strictly speaking the Philistines do not receive blessing. The Philistines gain wells only by quarrels and by stealing them from Isaac and his herdsmen, meaning that in reality Isaac is more the instrument of curse than blessing.<sup>74</sup> However, in the process, the Philistines do recognize that Isaac has been blessed by God (Gen 26:28–29). The extent to which God has blessed Isaac causes the Philistines to fear him, so much so that they make a treaty with him to prevent any harm that might come to them because of Isaac's greatness (Gen 26:28–31). Hence, the narrative context of Gen 26:4 supports a translation of the Hitpael of *בָּרַךְ* in which others recognize Isaac's greatness and ingratiate themselves to him, seeking his blessing and desiring to be on good terms with him. This is consistent with a paradigm of blessing instrumentation in which Abraham and his descendants are the mediators of God's blessing.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As indicated by analysis of the Hebrew verbal stems, evidence from cognate languages, and examination of the pertinent biblical texts and their versions, the Niphal of *בָּרַךְ* is best translated as medio-passive ("be/become blessed") and the Hitpael of *בָּרַךְ* should be understood as a reflexive action by which the state of blessing is achieved, declared, or estimated ("make/declare/consider oneself to be blessed"). Accordingly, the Niphal relates to

<sup>73</sup> K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, pp. 238–239.

<sup>74</sup> K. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing, and the Nations*, p. 240; D. J. A. Clines, "The Ancestor in Danger: But Not the Same Danger," in *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (JSOTSup 94; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), pp. 82–83.

the general state of being blessed, whereas the Hitpael relates to the process by which that state of blessing is achieved, declared, or estimated.<sup>75</sup>

Both the Niphal (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14) and the Hitpael (Gen 22:18; 26:4) of בָּרַךְ are used in God's promises of blessing to the patriarchs in Genesis, but the two stems have slightly different meanings as indicated by their differing contexts. Whereas the medio-passive Niphal is not specific as to the role of the subject in the action, instead only noting that the subject was blessed, the Hitpael specifically denotes the nations' active role in seeking the patriarchs' blessing. This focus on the nations' participation in turn reflects the successful status of the patriarchs and their role as a source of blessing, creating a reciprocal relationship between the nations and the patriarchs. The difference between the Niphal and Hitpael of בָּרַךְ is thus one of focus, but even though their nuances are different, both stems reflect the same paradigm of blessing mediation rather than blessing utterance.

---

<sup>75</sup> The conclusion reached here that the Niphal relates to a state and the Hitpael relates to a process is similar to that of R. Benton, "Niphal and Hitpael of בָּרַךְ," pp. 13–15. However, unlike Benton, I have argued that diathesis is an important element of the discussion. The contrast in situation aspect (i.e., state versus process) between the Niphal and Hitpael naturally derives from the fact that the Niphal is medio-passive and that the Hitpael is reflexive, as argued above. Rather than reflecting a dichotomy between circumscribed actions and more open-ended ones as Benton contends, the Niphal and Hitpael therefore reflect a contrast between the state of being blessed and the act itself by which that state is brought about. Thus, *contra* Benton, the Niphal and Hitpael of בָּרַךְ do contrast according to a medio-passive/reflexive distinction.